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“We all stand before history”: (Re)Locating Saro-Wiwa in the Biafran war canon

Abstract

Since Ken Saro-Wiwa’s execution in 1995, critical accounts of his intellectual legacy have tended to focus on the influence of the Ogoni struggle on his writing, and as a consequence have overlooked the role played by the Nigeria-Biafra war in the development of his intellectual sensibility. Given that Saro-Wiwa worked as a government administrator during the war, and wrote a novel, a memoir, and a book of poetry in response to the conflict, this article works to relocate his legacy in the trajectory of Biafran war literature. By exploring Saro-Wiwa’s negotiation of ideas of canon and history in his Biafran war writing, this article argues that the civil war is a traumatic but transformative preoccupation of his literary and political work. In doing so, it draws on theoretical insights about the self-reflexive narration of history and trauma, and engages with the potential for poetry to textually re-embody marginalized voices.

I am one of the very few Nigerians who were privileged to be close to the events of the crisis in its various theatres. My experience may therefore be of interest.

(Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* 10)

They speak of war

Of bows and arrows

[...]

I sing my love

For Maria. (Saro-Wiwa, *Songs in a Time of War* 13)

In a letter addressed to Sister Majella McCarron from his detention cell in the summer of 1994, Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941-1995) wrote about the ongoing campaign of MOSOP (The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People), which fought for justice following the environmental devastation of Ogoniland (a region in the Niger Delta) by the oil company Shell:¹

My worry, as ever, is the Ogoni people. [...] I strongly believe that we will be able to re-create Ogoni society. What we are passing through now was absolutely necessary. It's not even as bad as the civil war when we were not psychologically prepared & were mere cannon fodder! (Saro-Wiwa, *Silence Would Be Treason* 57)

Saro-Wiwa wrote twenty-eight letters (including twenty-seven original poems) to Sr. Majella over Saro-Wiwa during a period of twenty-three months from 20 October 1993 to 14 September 1995 (Fallon 3). In many of the letters, the writer speaks about his concern for the terrible conditions endured by the Ogoni people and also of his continuing belief in the aims of MOSOP. However, while not ostensibly central to the missive quoted above, Saro-Wiwa's subsequent admission that "[w]hat we are passing through now was absolutely necessary" is qualified and justified by the ironic assertion that no matter how terrible the situation might be for himself and the Ogoni people, "[i]t's not even as bad as the civil war" (*SWBT* 57).

This reference to the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), also known as the Nigeria-Biafra War, demonstrates the residual influence of the three-year internecine conflict--waged between the Nigerian military government and the secessionist Eastern Region--on Saro-Wiwa even as the Ogoni struggle escalates more than two decades later. The juxtaposition of these both disparate and related historical moments recalls Nadine Gordimer's appropriation of Gramsci's notion of the interregnum, which she uses to convey the existential crisis she

perceives in apartheid South Africa (“Living in the Interregnum”). The interregnum is a state in which “the old is dying, and the new cannot be born” (Gramsci qutd. in Gordimer, “Living in the Interregnum”); where “[h]istorical coordinates don’t fit life any longer” (“Living in the Interregnum”).² By building on and interrogating this notion of historical rupture in Saro-Wiwa’s Biafran war writing, this paper refines understanding of both his literary and political legacy. My central contention is that, rather than being a marginal matter in his work, the civil war is central to Saro-Wiwa’s self-construction as a canonical Nigerian writer and public intellectual. By reading across his Biafran war writing, we are able to relocate Saro-Wiwa as a self-reflexive writer who both interrogates and creatively re-embodies history in order to engage readers and activists alike in struggles against oppression.

The connection this letter forges between Saro-Wiwa in the 1990s and the Nigeria-Biafra War has complex roots. Saro-Wiwa worked as an Administrator for the Port of Bonny in Eastern Nigeria, and later as Commissioner of the Executive Council of Rivers State during the conflict (Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain* 9); in response to his experiences he wrote *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1985), the memoirs *On a Darkling Plain* (1989) and *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995), and the book of poetry *Songs in a Time of War* (1985). Indeed, his connection to the war is further elaborated in his later letters, where Saro-Wiwa refers to a film made of him “in the Civil War days” (*SWBT* 93), which he suggests could be used during a ceremony celebrating his work with MOSOP. He also mentions the Biafran leader Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu’s role in negotiations between the Nigerian government and Ogoni politicians (*SWBT* 120), whom Saro-Wiwa roundly condemns for his role in causing the civil war in *On a Darkling Plain* (*OADP* 10).

And yet, despite his involvement and lingering interest in the war, little of the critical work done on Saro-Wiwa as a writer-activist pays much regard to the significance of Biafra in the development of his political and intellectual labors. As an example, Charles Lock argues

in *Ken Saro-Wiwa: Writer and Political Activist* (2000) that “[o]ne cannot write about Saro-Wiwa without writing about the Ogoni” (4). While Lock does engage with some of Saro-Wiwa’s writing on the Nigeria-Biafra war in his essay, particularly the stylistic experimentation in *Sozaboy*, the scholar focuses on the ways the novel informs and anticipates the Ogoni struggle rather than considering how it might also write back to and be driven by Saro-Wiwa’s interests in the civil war. True, the media attention garnered by the Ogoni struggle after Saro-Wiwa’s execution goes some way to explain why critics tend not to focus on his portrayal of Biafra. However, I argue that the lack of engagement with Saro-Wiwa’s writing on the Nigeria-Biafra war is also reflected in 21st-Century appraisals of the Biafran literary canon.³

In the first part of the article, I broadly examine Saro-Wiwa’s impact on the development of Biafran war literature and the Nigerian public intellectual. I contend that his novel *Sozaboy* was pivotal in perpetuating the dissemination of Biafran literature in Western literary markets by tying the genre inextricably with trauma discourse, and in helping to bind the notion of the public intellectual with Biafra for subsequent generations of Nigerian writers. In the second part, I explore Saro-Wiwa’s fractured and self-referential presentation of Biafran history in his intertextual memoirs *On a Darkling Plain* and *A Month and a Day*. I argue that they subvert linear narrative conventions in order to foreground the tangled and irreconcilable nature of history, and involve readers in the process of historiographical interrogation. In the third part, I consider how studying Saro-Wiwa’s book of poetry *Songs in a Time of War* helps to relocate his body in his writing. I demonstrate that his poetry works to embody tropes of love and intimacy that disrupt the destruction of war, which both humanize and reimagine the conflict’s legacy.

Writing Trauma and the (Re)Creation of the Biafran War Canon

For Arthur Mezler, public intellectuals experience a paradoxical desire to dedicate themselves both to theoretical contemplation and action (4). Given the very public nature of Saro-Wiwa's stand for Ogoni justice and the violent response it elicited from the Nigerian government, it could be argued that he avoided being hamstrung by this tension by choosing action over contemplation. However, Mezler further contends that public intellectuals must do both things by taking a position of "detached attachment" in relation to contentious issues (4). While this notion of detachment in action helps to explain why references to the Nigeria-Biafra war continue to crop up in Saro-Wiwa's later letters, such a configuration is predicated upon the assumption that the writer's work on the civil war is always informing his ideas about the Ogoni crisis and not the other way around. Edward Said complicates Mezler's definition by arguing that the primary role of the public intellectual is to "make evident the multiplicity and complexity of history" (37). By doing so intellectuals problematize simplistic or incendiary accounts of history that can be used to manipulate narratives of national identity and official memory (Said 37-38). Said thus conceives of another tension in the work of the public intellectual: it must demonstrate the bias involved in historical representation while offering a measured and precise interpretation of it.

In his prison memoir *A Month and a Day*, Saro-Wiwa speaks to this issue by asserting: "literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics, by intervention" (AMAAD 55). This self-referential definition plays on Gramsci's configuration of the intellectual's role in both unifying society and helping it to engage in socio-economic and political issues (Gramsci 87). But while any attempt to homogenize Nigerian society would be undercut by the country's diverse ethnic and political make-up, which Saro-Wiwa knows only too well, he does feel that his writing should speak to all sections of the Nigerian population. Maureen Eke agrees with Saro-Wiwa's assessment that he combines his literary and political interests, but argues that he does this solely for the purposes of furthering the Ogoni struggle (Eke 105).

This argument once again conflates Saro-Wiwa's political writing with the campaign of MOSOP, and glosses over the preoccupation with the Biafran war in his texts.

Another example of Saro-Wiwa's writing on Biafra being marginalized can be found in the work of the novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie has repeatedly invoked the influence of earlier Nigerian authors in the development of the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), her own celebrated portrayal of the war.⁴ She gives a clearer sense of these influences in the essay "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience", where she reveals that works by Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, and Wole Soyinka were particularly important to the development of *Yellow Sun* ("African 'Authenticity'" 50-51). Given that authenticity is the subject of the piece, one way of reading Adichie's references to these titans of Nigerian literature is that she is trying to authenticate her own intervention in the narrative retelling of the Biafran war, and by so doing works to inscribe herself into the literary canon that has developed out of it. And yet, despite the fact that he is the author of one of the most famous narratives pertaining to Biafra, Adichie chooses not to mention Saro-Wiwa in this essay.

This may not be a deliberate slight against Saro-Wiwa by Adichie--many famous authors, such as Elechi Amadi, Buchi Emecheta, and Festus Iyayi are omitted from the essay--but Saro-Wiwa's peripheral position in discussions of the Biafran war canon is further reinforced in the printed text of *Yellow Sun*. Following the Author's Note at the end of the text, Adichie includes a list of thirty-one works of fiction and non-fiction pertaining to Biafra that aided her writing, by a mixture of writers including Achebe, Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, and Flora Nwapa. Once again, neither *Sozaboy* nor *On a Darkling Plain* is cited. Why this repeated omission? Although there are clear political contrasts between the two writers--Adichie is Igbo and *Yellow Sun* focuses on the plight of her people, while *Sozaboy* and *On a Darkling Plain* offer damning critiques of the Igbo elite--Adichie happily lists Soyinka who is

Yoruba, and Elechi Amadi who, like Saro-Wiwa, worked as an official in the Nigerian government during the war.

Perhaps the answer lies in the form and narrative content of *Sozaboy*. The distinct ‘rotten’ style of *Sozaboy*, in which Saro-Wiwa employs a literary form of demotic or pidgin English--hence ‘sozaboy’ instead of ‘soldier boy’--and its focus on a conscripted soldier from the rural Niger Delta unversed in national politics were certainly innovative additions to literature of the Biafran war. But the fact that someone as invested in the Biafran war canon as Adichie fails to mention Saro-Wiwa and *Sozaboy* when discussing the conflict’s legacy substantiates my belief that, as with the explorations of Saro-Wiwa’s political activism, the significance of his relationship with Biafra tends to be relegated to the periphery or elided altogether. *Sozaboy* is indeed unique, but its relationship with the rest of the Biafran war canon, and the relationship between Saro-Wiwa and Adichie as public intellectuals, is much more significant and complex.

Sozaboy tells the story of a young man who willingly leaves his rural community, Dukana, to join the army of an unnamed secessionist cause; he does so to prove his manhood and win the affections of Agnes. However, after experiencing the harsh brutality of war, Sozaboy flees from the frontline and sets out to find his family. The novel concludes with Sozaboy running away from his home after returning to find that the town’s remaining inhabitants believe him to be a malicious ghost come back to haunt them:

As I was going, I looked at the place where my mama house used to stand. And tears began to drop like rain from my eyes. I walked quickly from my own town Dukana and in fact I did not know where I was going.

And as I was going, I was just thinking how the war have spoiled my town Dukana, uselessed many people, killed many others, killed my mama and my wife,

Agnes, my beautiful young wife with J.J.C. and now it have made me like porson wey get leprosy because I have no town again. (*Sozaboy* 181)

Sozaboy's psychological and material rejection of his home at the end of the novel is significant because Dukana is a proxy for Saro-Wiwa's own Ogoniland, which the writer prefers to call simply 'Ogoni' due to the inextricable relationship between the Ogoni people and their land (*A Month and a Day* 3). Thus, for Sozaboy, leaving Dukana is akin to him repudiating his identity. But this traumatic excision is compounded by his uncertainty about the future: "I did not know where I was going" (181). The trauma of this dislocation is further embodied in the stream of tears that fall from Sozaboy's eyes, metonymically representing the bodies of the people "uselessed" and "killed" (*Sozaboy* 181) in the war.

Although the critical reception of *Sozaboy* has tended to neglect its position in the Biafran literary canon, the novel's stylized depiction of conflict has been studied in depth. Eke, for instance, offers a reading of *Sozaboy* using Simon Gikandi's conception of "the modernist novel, or 'fiction of crisis' in African literature" (Eke 96). For Gikandi, fictions of crisis are concerned with exploring the immediate symptoms and effects of historical crises rather than their causes (Gikandi qutd. in Eke 96); Eke applies this notion to *Sozaboy*, arguing that Saro-Wiwa interrogates historical reality in the novel to expose social ills in Nigeria but not provide solutions for them (Eke 97). Indeed, the refusal to tie up threads torn asunder by war at the end of *Sozaboy* seems to make manifest Eke's reading of the novel. However, by choosing to read the novel as 'crisis' as opposed to 'trauma' fiction, Eke glosses over the unresolved legacy of psychological and social wounds engendered by the conflict.

Trauma theory is an important facet of the African literary modernism Gikandi formulates. While the field's development is usually traced back to 1980 when Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was added the America Psychiatric Association's diagnostic

manual--after which trauma theory started to pervade the understanding of subjectivity in the industrial world (Luckhurst 1)--it was Cathy Caruth's work on literary portrayals of trauma that developed cultural trauma theory in the 1990s (Luckhurst 4).⁵ While I do not have the space to fully elaborate upon the relationship between *Sozaboy* and the burgeoning field of trauma studies in this article, it is worth underscoring that the novel was conceived and published during this period: when trauma discourse was developing into one of the primary frameworks through which wars and other political crises were interrogated, albeit a predominantly Euro-American one. Indeed, Stef Craps warns of the dangers of applying the Western construction of trauma uncritically to different contexts, which he argues amounts to a form of cultural imperialism (22). Craps' concern is that failing to situate traumas in their larger contexts leads to psychological recovery being privileged over the transformation of oppressive political and socio-economic systems (27). However, because the rotten style of *Sozaboy* defies the grammatical and semantic conventions of standardized English--Sozaboy notes at one point that in Dukana, "[a]s grammar plenty, na so trouble plenty" (3)--both meaning and form are thrown into flux in the novel. Thus, *Sozaboy* cannot be fully reduced to a trauma framework.

But Saro-Wiwa's experimentation with the Biafran genre in the 1980s did not occur in isolation; comparable motivations inform the novel *Destination Biafra* (1982) by Buchi Emecheta. Unlike *Sozaboy*, Adichie does list *Destination Biafra* as an influence for *Yellow Sun*, but I suggest that Adichie's novel is indebted to the narrative tropes present in both texts. Near the end of *Destination Biafra*, the main protagonist Debbie makes a commitment to write her own history of Biafra: a meta-fictional manuscript she titles *Destination Biafra*. Debbie's text tells the story of the suffering that she and other women were subjected to during the war, and it is emphasized that "[i]f she should be killed, the entire story of the women's experience of the war would be lost" (223-224). This quotation fosters the idea that

new narratives of Biafra need to be written from the perspectives of marginalized groups to complicate understanding of the conflict. But *Destination Biafra* ends with Debbie watching her English lover board a plane as the Nigerian air force drops bombs on the airstrip, and we do not learn whether Debbie survives to publish her manuscript. The very possibility of her demise at the novel's close denies the reader, as in *Sozaboy*, any clear sense of narrative closure.

As with the meta-fictional trope seen in *Destination Biafra*, *Yellow Sun* is interspersed with the textual fragments of another invented Biafra novel titled *The World Was Silent When We Died*. These meta-fictional fragments, which fracture the narrative of *Yellow Sun* and foreground the imbricated development of Biafran literature, are revealed to be the work of Ugwu; like Sozaboy he is from a rural village and becomes conscripted by the secessionist cause, but later begins writing a novel of the war to atone for his involvement in the gang rape of a woman (*Yellow Sun* 365). This is important to my study of Saro-Wiwa's intellectual legacy because it demonstrates that the continuing popularity of the Biafran war genre, which has been central in Adichie positioning herself as a transnational writer and public intellectual, has been facilitated by the kinds of innovative work that Saro-Wiwa and others undertook in the 1980s to re-frame the thematic and formal scope of Biafran war narratives within the trauma theoretical paradigm. To use Caruth's formulation of trauma, these texts recast Biafra as an overwhelming experience of catastrophic events in which the response is a form of uncontrolled repetition of intrusive phenomena (*Unclaimed Experience* 11).

The publishing history of Biafran war literature also underlines the significance of *Sozaboy*. One of the key early publishers of Biafran war literature was the African Writers Series (AWS), an imprint of the William Heinemann publishing group. In *Africa Writes Back: The African Writers Series & the Launch of African Literature* (2008), James Currey, who ran the series from 1967 to 1984 (Currey xvii), writes that AWS publications by Nigerian authors

in the 1970s and early 1980s were dominated by portrayals of the civil war (43). This saturation of the early AWS catalogue can be partly explained by the influence of the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, who was the first general editor of the imprint. However, Currey also reveals that he was dubious about the genre's shelf life once Biafra had faded from the television screens of middle-class Britain (94). International awareness of the conflict developed through the dissemination of shocking images of Biafran refugee camps in newspapers and television programs. This demonstrates the way the international media first helped to create an audience for the civil war. Although *Sozaboy* was published by Longman rather than AWS, the novel was part of a larger movement in the 1980s that revitalized the genre once the Western media had lost interest in Biafra. Indeed, the recent international success of Biafran war novels such as *Yellow Sun* and *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) by Uzodinma Iweala, more than three decades after Currey raised concerns about the genre's longevity, demonstrates that an appetite for portrayals of Biafra endures. Both of these novels have since been adapted into films starring award-winning actors like Chiwetel Ejiofor and Idris Elba, showing that there is now a multimedia market for these narratives.⁶

While I am not suggesting that Saro-Wiwa's main objective for writing *Sozaboy* was to appeal to international publishers, I do think that he and other contemporary writers were astute in their creative efforts to refashion the history of Biafra in their novels. By feeding into, but also contesting, publishing trends forming at this time, they set the tone for future portrayals of the war in literature and film. Sarah Brouillette explores the dissemination of postcolonial literature in her work *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Market* (2007). Building upon Graham Huggan's argument in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001) that narratives of postcoloniality and cultural otherness have become commodified by the Western market (Huggan 28), Brouillette contends that such narratives have always involved commodification (75). Thus, postcolonial writers such as Saro-Wiwa

have to constantly negotiate the market and its implications in their texts, and engage with diverse and often contradictory audiences (Brouillette 75).

Despite being generally viewed as peripheral to and anomalous within the formation of the Biafran literary canon, Saro-Wiwa and his Biafran war writings are in fact representative of a paradigmatic shift that transformed the creative, political, and market scope of the genre. This analysis demonstrates that Saro-Wiwa did not only use Biafra to lay the ground work for his public intellectual work with the Ogoni struggle, but that he was also concerned with establishing a place for himself in the pantheon of Nigerian writers and intellectual elite. As Mezler and Said suggest, it is in the way that writers negotiate just these sorts of tensions that their merit as public intellectuals is tested.

(De)Constructing Narrative and History in *On a Darkling Plain* and *A Month and a Day*

In the Author's Note to *On a Darkling Plain*, written in 1989, Saro-Wiwa explains why he waited two decades before publishing his civil war memoir:

Twenty years after the war, reconciliation has been achieved and the scars of war have largely healed. However, the events of that war remain a powerful reminder of our past and point the way to the future. If future wars are not to be fought, the story of the last civil war must be fully detailed, analysed and understood. Hence this publication at this time. (*OADP* 9)⁷

Saro-Wiwa frames his civil war memoir by emphasizing the present and future capacity of the history of the civil war to aid progressive development in Nigeria. However, while the writer makes a vague claim that reconciliation has been achieved and the traumatic wounds of the war healed, this supposed historical reconciliation is undermined by the conditional phrase,

“[i]f future wars are not to be fought” (*OADP* 9). Such a condition casts doubt upon, and demonstrates the hesitancy of the writer’s hope for, the continuing success of such a resolution. Indeed, the very act of publishing a new narrative of the war requires the reopening of historical wounds and the contestation of earlier accounts of the Biafran conflict. Thus, from the very beginning of *Darkling Plain*, Saro-Wiwa is both hopeful and skeptical of the possibility of producing a reconciled narrative out of the painful history of the civil war: a self-conscious skepticism towards historical representation which the text as a whole tries to work through.

The writer’s claim that *Darkling Plain* is a “fully detailed, analysed and understood” (*OADP* 9) historical account of the Nigeria-Biafra war has been widely critiqued. Craig W. McLuckie offers a particularly negative reading of the text, calling it “a badly rendered, biased, and in areas a repugnant memoir” (45). This caustic criticism of *Darkling Plain* takes particular offence at the way Saro-Wiwa tries to package the work as a comprehensive account of the war when, in McLuckie’s view, the author’s bias and self-centeredness are so clearly discernible in the text. Such censure is echoed in other critical accounts of the work (Ojo-Ade 1993; Ezenwa-Ohaeto 1996), and the cause of the memoir’s controversy can be perceived in Saro-Wiwa’s analysis of the Igbo population’s reaction to the “No Victors, No Vanquished” policy. Coined by Ukpabi Asika, the Federal Government Administrator of the East Central State, the policy aimed at fostering a spirit of reconciliation after the war; Saro-Wiwa argues that the Igbo population embraced the idea in order to absolve themselves of responsibility for the war: “It proved indeed to be a very welcome message and the Ibos latched on to it tenuously. So much so that they tended to forget that there had been any war at all” (*OADP* 230).

Achebe, an Igbo writer, refutes this interpretation in his own Biafran war memoir, *There Was A Country* (2012). In the text, Achebe criticizes those who have praised the

Nigerian government's reconciliation policy: "I have news for them: The Igbo were not and continue not to be reintegrated into Nigeria" (235). While this contradicts Saro-Wiwa's claim about Igbo manipulation of the 'No Vanquished' dictum, Achebe's perspective is arguably just as biased, and it is difficult to discern whether Saro-Wiwa actually blames the Igbo for their reaction to the policy. After stating that the group welcomed the policy, he suggests they only "latched onto it tenuously" and "tended to forget" (*OADP* 230) the war as a result, undermining the initial importance he ascribes.

To generalize about the Igbo population in this way glosses over the diverse experiences of Igbo communities during the war. However, Saro-Wiwa is also at pains to single out the Igbo elite, led by Ojukwu, as the most blameworthy culprits of the war (*OADP* 10). Moreover, the writer's contradictory presentation of the Igbo reaction to the government's policy makes salient the inherently problematic nature of reconciliation: where there is a need for blame to be apportioned along with forgiveness, and where an attempt is made to produce a 'true' account of contested events. So while McLuckie argues that the contradictory style of *Darkling Plain* prevents the reader from perceiving a clear vision of how reconciliation might be achieved (McLuckie 40), such a reading fails to note the way the memoir complicates the very idea of a reconciled, united society. Indeed, the self-involved quality McLuckie perceives in Saro-Wiwa's civil war memoir works to creatively push back against just this kind of reductive conclusion.

Saro-Wiwa's second memoir *A Month and a Day* (1995), which recounts his illegal imprisonment by the State Security Service from 21 June to 22 July 1993, engages directly with the controversy caused by *Darkling Plain*:

It was a controversial book. In a way, it was fortuitous that I was writing a column in the government-owned weekly *Sunday Times* at the time. I used the column, called

‘Similia’ to answer the critics of my new book, and to develop further the ideas which I had expressed in it.

The newspaper column widened my reading audience and spread my ideas to a considerable extent. Week after week, I made sure the name Ogoni appeared before the eyes of readers. It was a television technique, designed to leave the name indelibly in their minds. Sometimes I would deliberately provoke readers or fly a kite in the acerbic and polemical column. (AMAAD 45)⁸

Saro-Wiwa reveals that he consciously tried to court controversy with the publication of *Darkling Plain*, and that he used techniques from different media forms like television to reinforce the memoir’s political message. His satirical television series *Basi and Company*, which made him a household name in Nigeria (Lock 12), shows that he was aware of television’s ability to engage people in politics. This explains why Saro-Wiwa mentions documentary footage taken of himself during the civil war in one of his letters to Sr. Majella, hoping that it would help raise awareness of his plight (SWBT 93). Furthermore, Saro-Wiwa suggests in this quotation from *Month and a Day* that the memoir acted as a catalyst for his more concerted efforts regarding the Ogoni struggle: a political and intellectual commitment consolidated and developed in his “acerbic and polemical column” (AMAAD 45).

However, this self-awareness is not only present in *Month and a Day*. In one salient example from earlier in *Darkling Plain*, Saro-Wiwa draws attention to his supposed bias against the Igbo population: “I, for one, have sometimes been told in all seriousness that to have a bad character bearing an Ibo name in my novel or short story means that I am prejudiced against the Ibos” (OADP 230). Although his logic is questionable and does not absolve him of accusations of prejudice, it does importantly demonstrate that Saro-Wiwa was conscious of and self-reflexive in drawing attention to the controversy his writing was

making. Yifen Beus defines self-reflexivity as the breaking down of the boundary between a work and its audience, which produces a reciprocal dialectic that implicates the audience in the work's process of becoming and in the meanings it generates (136).

Beus's work specifically explores self-reflexivity in African cinema, so her definition is particularly relevant given Saro-Wiwa's use of filmic techniques in his political writing; it enables us to reformulate the writer's contentious claim that *Darkling Plain* presents a "fully detailed, analysed" (*OADP* 9) account of the Biafran war. Rather than being an arrogant claim of authorial omniscience, Saro-Wiwa's self-conscious style represents an attempt to reflexively construct a reciprocal dialectic with the reader. This dialectic, which draws the reader's attention to and involves them in the text's very process of becoming, works to produce a more nuanced and fully analyzed response to Biafra. But as the reader is only party to Saro-Wiwa's own account on the war, a question arises of how self-reflexivity alone can lead the reader to generate new understanding of such complex history? The answer, I suggest, is that the very idea of a linear or authoritative narrative of history is put under scrutiny in *Darkling Plain*.

At the beginning of the final chapter, the narrative makes a temporal shift. Saro-Wiwa's immediate post-war account written in the past tense is replaced with a commentary written largely in the present tense from the 1980s: "It is possible now to take a panoramic look at the country to determine how the civil war has affected persons, communities and ideas which are the subject of my story; indeed, to ascertain how Nigeria has survived the peace" (*OADP* 239). This quotation textually mirrors the self-conscious assertion of a deep historical perspective made at the beginning of the memoir. However, in this later moment Saro-Wiwa makes an even bolder claim, declaring that he is now able to "take a panoramic look at the country" (*OADP* 239) and make sense of the civil war's effects. Notwithstanding the destabilizing and reciprocal dialectic that is forged between the reader

and text when this kind of self-conscious authorial intervention is foregrounded, Saro-Wiwa subverts his own claim to being beholden of a panoramic view by casting his narrative of Biafra not as a historical fact, but as “my story” (*OADP* 239). This works to frame *Darkling Plain* as an historical account at once sweeping and particular: a contradictory perspective that has subversive narrative effects. Indeed, after this moment, the writer asks how the country “survived the peace” (*OADP* 239) instead of asking how it survived the war, showing how his shifting perspective has augmented the linear narrative of Nigerian history. Cyprian Ekwensi employs such a rhetorical twist in his Biafran war novel *Divided We Stand* (1980): a title that similarly subverts clichéd configurations of national unity. In the novel, the journalist Isaac Chika perceptively notes: “Nigeria is a place where everything always turns upside down!” (38). Given the way Saro-Wiwa plays with the very idea of history in *Darkling Plain* in order to complicate understanding of the civil war, I think he would agree with Isaac’s observation.

Saro-Wiwa’s subversion of history becomes more complex in *Darkling Plain* when he reflects on the post-war policy of Nigeria’s military leader Yakubu Gowon to bribe government officials in order to get them to do work (*OADP* 243): “Gowon’s action has clearly been counter-productive; living in Nigeria becomes a nightmare. Social problems, among them, armed robbery, mount high and the people begin to blame the leader they have revered” (*OADP* 243). The effect of this shift in perspective--from describing the past’s impact on the present (“has clearly been”) to the developing present (“living in Nigeria becomes”)--is to cast the repercussions of the war as fluidly unfolding: lending a double meaning to Saro-Wiwa’s subsequent assertion that “[t]he situation is out of control” (*OADP* 243). The passage reflects both the destabilizing oscillation between historical contexts deployed in *Darkling Plain*, but also foregrounds the difficulty involved in trying to impose narrative order upon traumatic history. Luckhurst helps clarify this difficulty, arguing that

trauma narratives cannot be told in a linear way; rather, they “must fracture conventional causality” (9).

The temporal sequence of *Darkling Plain* becomes fractured when Saro-Wiwa’s narrative voice, still in the present tense, begins careering non-chronologically between different years and events. He begins by recalling a meeting “[e]arly in 1975” (*OADP* 244) with Takubu Danjuma, then jumps back to a conversation in “1972 or thereabouts” (244) with Justice Udo Udoma, and subsequently shifts forward to “March 1973” (244) when he describes being “kicked out of the Rivers State Government and turn[ing] to shopkeeping to earn a living” (244). The narrative then moves forward again to 1975, when “the situation has worsened considerably” (*OADP* 244), and settles back into a more conventional chronology after Saro-Wiwa reports the overthrow of Gowon on 29 July 1975 (244). This oscillation reinforces the sense of traumatic repetition provoked by Saro-Wiwa’s inability to offer an account of the war capable of reconciling his personal perspective within any kind of unified national narrative. By foregrounding both his own complicity as an agent during the civil war and the contaminated partiality of his narration, Saro-Wiwa self-reflexively destabilizes and subverts the very authority which he and other writers of historical memoirs claim.⁹ Such a process of self-reflection also opens up the work of historians, which always involves a degree of distortion and fabrication, to the necessary work of humane critique (Colapietro 39). Thus, Saro-Wiwa makes palpable the unfinished, irreconcilable, but also ethical nature of history in *Darkling Plain*, and opens up that history to further interrogation by implicating the reader in the processes of narrative construction and critique.

In *Month and a Day*, the writer reveals that “[b]y the time the controversy over *The Darkling Plain* died down [...] the Ogoni question had begun increasingly to occupy my detailed attention” (*AMAAD* 45). This figures *Darkling Plain* as a turning point in his writing and activism: both inspiring and facilitating his intellectual commitment to the Ogoni cause

by giving him a public platform from which to spread his political message. However, this clarity regarding the influence of *Darkling Plain* in the broader development of the Ogoni struggle only crystallizes retrospectively in *Month and a Day*. While *Darkling Plain* interrogates the civil war by constructing a vacillating historical dialogue between different timeframes, *Month and a Day* is, perhaps surprisingly given its subtitle *A Detention Diary*, even more concerned with exploring the history that led to the writer's first significant period of detention. Four of the memoir's ten chapters are dedicated to retracing the historical trajectory of post-war Nigeria and Saro-Wiwa's own struggle for the Ogoni people, which in the 2005 edition make up over half of the text (94 of 171 pages). By contrast, Wole Soyinka writes in his own prison memoir *The Man Died* (1972) that the text is "the private record of one survival" (25), and makes very few references to the broader history of the war.¹⁰

At the start of Chapter 4, the inactivity and monotony engendered by his detention causes Saro-Wiwa to reflect on his work for the Ogoni struggle: "My worry about the Ogoni has been an article of faith, conceived of in primary school, nurtured through secondary school, actualized in the Nigerian civil war in 1967-70" (AMAAD 39). That Saro-Wiwa's dedication to the Ogoni cause developed during the civil war is unsurprising given the way he (and academics subsequently) have reinforced this one-way temporal and causal connection between the two conflicts. However, *Month and a Day* complicates such a linear configuration by inserting excerpts from earlier works, such as his 1969 pamphlet *The Ogoni Nationality Today and Tomorrow* (AMAAD 40). Written in his guise as Commissioner of the River States during and for a period after the war--his main responsibility being to rehabilitate groups such as the Ogoni who had been effected by the war (AMAAD 40)--the pamphlet broadly supports the military government's proposal to create new states at the end of the war to ensure national unity. Given the way Saro-Wiwa self-consciously plays on the idea of narrative reconciliation in *Darkling Plain*, the fact that he revisits this early pamphlet in

Month and a Day with its much bolder pronouncements, illustrates the writer's impulse to continually revise his own textual engagement with the war.

Saro-Wiwa moderates his earlier optimism in the later memoir: "Looking back on these words, I now realize how pious my hopes were, and how much they failed. The Rivers state did not prove to be any better than the Eastern Region in reconciling the interest of its component ethnic groups" (AMAAD 42). He admits that his earlier interpretation of the civil war, which took an uncomplicated view of history, resulted in a degree of failure. This helps to explain why Saro-Wiwa and many other Nigerian writers feel compelled to revisit and perpetuate this historical trauma in their works. But such a compulsion to repeat can also have aesthetic effects (Nöth 21); by drawing attention to its own incompleteness and intertextuality, the memoir creatively contributes to the developing narrative of Nigerian history without precluding the possibility of creative interpretations.

But this aesthetic of self-interrogation, which is threaded throughout *Month and a Day*, is not just for the purposes of historiographical critique; Saro-Wiwa also examines the impact of Biafra on his own muddled trajectory as a public intellectual. This can be perceived when he describes being driven by his captors past the University of Benin, which brings to mind his youthful dream of becoming an academic:

I had had to forgo [that life] more than 25 years earlier when I was faced with the possible break-up of Nigeria during the civil war of 1967. [...]

I began to feel that I had also failed to end the enslavement of the Ogoni. Their condition had got marginally better, but the future looked bleak unless something was done urgently. (AMAAD 17-18)

The reference to Biafra in this quotation works to disrupt the temporal progression of the prison narrative Saro-Wiwa is constructing: a strategy that is indicative of the truncated structure of *Month and a Day* as a whole. The reflective vacillation from the present Ogoni struggle to the Biafran war, which subverts the chronological sequence of the two events, then shifts back from Biafra to Ogoni when Saro-Wiwa admits that his previous political writing has failed in its purpose of ending “the enslavement of the Ogoni” (AMAAD 18). However, this confession enables Saro-Wiwa to clarify his own understanding of his commitment to the Ogoni struggle, which he describes as work that must be “done urgently” (AMAAD 18).

This historical and narrative oscillation between Biafra and Ogoni in *Month and a Day*, enabled by the text’s interrogative aesthetic which facilitates the movement between and across disparate temporalities, also complicates some of Saro-Wiwa’s attitudes towards the Biafran secession. Quoting a speech he made shortly after the creation of MOSOP in 1991, which begins with the reflective but fortifying declaration that “[a] writer is his cause” (AMAAD 56), Saro-Wiwa again reflects upon the historic development of the Ogoni and Nigerian crises. After characteristically denouncing Ojukwu for having “scuttled” (AMAAD 59) negotiations with Gowon in 1966, Saro-Wiwa’s narrative takes an unexpected turn when he concedes: “Many of the issues raised by Ojukwu which led to the civil war are as valid today as they were then” (AMAAD 59). Citing the untidy end of the war and greed for oil as major contributing factors to Nigeria’s deep political and economic divisions (AMAAD 59), Saro-Wiwa both validates the grievances that led to the civil war and maps them onto the later Ogoni conflict: a move catalyzed by the narrative fluctuation woven throughout the text. While this quotation does not reconcile Saro-Wiwa’s damning opinion of the Biafran leader, it does demonstrate the maturation of his desire to reject the possibility of a unified narrative of the war, which *Darkling Plain* still holds out some hope for. Indeed, the more assured self-

reflexive aesthetic that Saro-Wiwa employs in *Month and a Day* enables him to perceive parallels as well as distinctions between himself and Ojukwu, and between Biafra and Ogoni.

By drawing attention to these parallels in spite of his personal feelings towards Ojukwu, Saro-Wiwa fulfils Said's call for public intellectuals to produce complex and sober histories that disrupt the "falsified unities" (37) offered by official national narratives. Building upon the self-reflexive work begun in *Darkling Plain*, *Month and a Day* offers an intricate fashioning of history through its complex internal movements and mirroring, which refract the Ogoni crisis through multiple historical lenses. This complexity nuances Saro-Wiwa's work on Biafra, enabling him to find balance between contradictory yearnings and help the reader to come to a deeper, but still crucially incomplete, understanding of his nation's history.

Locating Saro-Wiwa as an Embodied Intellectual in *Songs in a Time of War*

Saro-Wiwa's textual preoccupation with the history and canon of Biafra is clear, but by aligning him too closely with his civil war writing we risk conflating his work as a public intellectual with his textual rendering of the conflict. Such a reductive elision would work to deaden the idiosyncratic quality of Saro-Wiwa's voice in his texts, and problematically cast him as a symbol of the contested history of the civil war; Lock falls into this trap when he asserts that writing about the writer always involves writing about the Ogoni cause (4). Indeed, Saro-Wiwa himself explores the feeling of being reduced to a political sound bite in *Month and a Day*: "I had been very much in the news lately, and, as often happens to those who have the misfortune, was considered more a news item than as a living being with flesh and blood" (AMAAD 5). He demonstrates a perceptive understanding of the way his actions and writings were, and would go on to be, interpreted as disembodied symbols of political struggle. Misty Bastian reinforces the writer's perception by arguing that the name Ken Saro-

Wiwa became a talisman for disparate and often ephemeral political causes during the Ogoni campaign (148). This process of appropriation and commodification has worked to gloss over Saro-Wiwa's particular motivations and tangible political impact. However, as the writer's self-reflexive memoirs resist being reduced to linear narratives of history, such a resistant textual aesthetic also works to disrupt the potential for discursive disembodiment in his poetry.

Songs in a Time of War (1985), which like *Darkling Plain* was written during the conflict but published more than a decade later, portrays and subverts the material effects of war by juxtaposing images of battle and destruction with the familial and intimate. An example of this oppositional linkage is evident in the short poem "Voices", where Saro-Wiwa contrasts the voices of those who instigated the war with his own: "[...] They speak of war / Of bows and arrows // They speak of tanks / And putrid human flesh // I sing my love / For Maria" (*SITW* 13). The writer opposes the emotion of his love for Maria, his wife, with the apathy and anonymity of those who propagated the war, while the reference to such embodied love in the final line disrupts the destructive decay presented earlier in the poem. Poetry is an embodied practice created through the body that expresses personal experience (Bracegirdle 211-212), and the edifying quality of love inscribed in "Voices" is further elaborated in the poem "For Maria". While the second poem does not overtly evoke the material consequences of the civil war, Saro-Wiwa does reveal that it is Maria "Who alone can quell the storm / That flays my heart" (*SITW* 26). It is then revealed that Maria's love eases and transforms Saro-Wiwa's suffering when he interacts with her physically: "Be the moon and the stars / And let me play still / In the softnesses you shed" (*SITW* 26). This poetic embodiment enables Saro-Wiwa to situate the war within his life and evoke a texture of humanity in his war poems, which Tanure Ojaide observes is unique among the poetry of the Biafran war (63).

Saro-Wiwa does not confine his poetry to this single collection; lines of verse crop up throughout his two memoirs, and songs are repeatedly inserted in his later letters. The poem “For Maria”, for instance, appears untitled in *Darkling Plain*, which invokes another form of self-reflexive repetition in Saro-Wiwa’s writing and works to help him negotiate his turmoil: “turning to softer, personal and more intimate matters [...] bring me some calm” (*OADP* 166). The writer continually describes the pacifying and enabling effects of poetic composition. In *Month and a Day*, he describes the terrible feeling of being refused a transfer to hospital by a magistrate: “But that momentary feeling only evoked in me a determination to pour all my resources, intellectual and otherwise, into creating a society where such things would not be. It brought forth the beginnings of a song” (*AMAAD* 155). In this moment, when the corrupt and cruel nature of his incarceration is viscerally embodied, Saro-Wiwa is able to transform the pain he feels into a deep resolve to help alleviate oppression in his society. The song which follows, titled “The True Prison”, describes prison not as a physical space, but as “the lies that have been drummed / Into your ears for one generation” (*AMAAD* 156). The sheer oppressive force of the lies and corruption that flourished in the wake of the Biafran war become crystallized in this song which, “Dear friend, turns our free world / Into a dreary prison” (*AMAAD* 156). Through the force of a poetic voice first forged during the civil war, we are able to relocate Saro-Wiwa as an embodied and compassionate figure in his writing.

The influence of this poetic invention is not only perceivable in Saro-Wiwa’s own Biafran war texts, however. In “African ‘Authenticity’ and the Biafran Experience”, Adichie remarks that a verse which she composed for *Yellow Sun* as part of the fragmented meta-text *The World Was Silent When We Died* was guided by the Igbo poet Christopher Okigbo’s “sparkling, intrepid and unforgettable spirit” (“African ‘Authenticity’” 52). Okigbo was killed whilst fighting for Biafra, and Adichie has often cited his influence on *Yellow Sun*. In the poem, Adichie explores the culpability of international bystanders who watched the

humanitarian crisis unfold in Biafra but did little to alleviate it: “There were photos / Displayed in gloss-filled pages of your *Life* / Did you see? Did you feel sorry briefly / Then turn round to hold your lover or wife?” (375).

Adichie suggests that she wrote this poem as a tribute to Okigbo’s spirit in *Yellow Sun* (“African ‘Authenticity’” 51). However, the reference to images of Biafra circulated by the international media, and the intimate detail of the “lover or wife” (375) who comforts a man unable to intervene, is much more evocative of Saro-Wiwa’s poetic portrayal of the war. He sings his love for Maria in *Songs in a Time of War* precisely because he cannot stop the atrocities unfolding in Biafra nor fully fathom the scale of the trauma: a memory which he feels compelled to revisit time and again in his writing. Adichie’s poem may condemn such inaction, but the embodied quality of the verse and its fragmented dispersal in *Yellow Sun* bear the hallmarks of Saro-Wiwa’s own distinctive style. Indeed, the very political and literary force of Adichie’s refashioning of the Biafran canon would not have been possible without Saro-Wiwa’s earlier intervention, which helped to destabilize the history of the civil war and open up the canon to such creative reimagining.

Conclusion

In Saro-Wiwa’s closing statement to the Military Appointed Tribunal on 10 November 1995, which he was prevented from reading on the day, the writer affirms: “We all stand before history” (AMAAD 173). Although he did not live to see the liberation of the Ogoni people or Nigerian society more broadly from corruption, his multi-form writing of the Biafran war demonstrates an ethical and embodied commitment to the interrogation of history as a never finished process of both creation and destruction: of love and hope as well as hate and despair. This commitment becomes transcendently re-embodied in Saro-Wiwa’s late poem “For Sister Majella McCarron”: “How many hours have we shared / And what oceans of ink

poured / From fearful hearts beating together / For the voiceless of the earth!” (SWBT 137).

The Biafran war is not named here, but the conflict’s haunting presence is woven through the hours of struggle, the oceans of ink and beating heart that drive Saro-Wiwa to empower the voiceless and oppressed. While he cannot resolve the Nigerian interregnum, and indeed rejects the very possibility of reconciling the Biafran trauma in his writing, his humane compassion remains embodied and alive in these texts: texts which encourage us all to help turn a dreary prison into a free world.

Endnotes

1. The letter was written on 13 August 1994, 16 months before Saro-Wiwa’s execution by the Nigerian military government on 10 November 1995 (*Silence Would Be Treason* 167). Sr. Majella, a member of the Missionary Institute of Our Lady of Apostles in Cork, worked extensively with Saro-Wiwa to campaign for Ogoni justice (Fallon 5).
2. In the essay, Gordimer explores her precarious position as a white writer in South Africa in the late period of apartheid, and calls for a new form of social democracy that rejects the economic and military oppression of Western capitalism.
3. The Biafran war canon is a large corpus of novels, plays, memoirs, poetry collections, and short stories written by Nigerian and transnational writers. For a comprehensive bibliography of the Nigerian Civil War canon, see Ugochukwu.
4. The novel, which I henceforth refer to as *Yellow Sun*, won Adichie the Orange Prize for Women’s fiction in 2007.
5. For Caruth’s work on trauma, see *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996).

6. Ejiofor and Elba perform in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013) and *Beasts of No Nation* (2015) respectively. *Beasts of No Nation* premiered on the television streaming website Netflix in October 2015.
7. I henceforth refer to *On a Darkling Plain* as *Darkling Plain*.
8. I henceforth refer to *A Month and a Day* as *Month and a Day*.
9. For further work on the narrative and political implications self-reflexivity, see Kapoor.
10. *The Man Died* was published soon after the end of the conflict, so Soyinka's response was much more immediate than Saro-Wiwa's in *Month and a Day*.

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